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NOTES ON THE FLORIDA SEMINOLE

By ALANSON SKINNER

IN the latter part of the summer of 1910 the writer went to southern Florida in the interest of the American Museum of Natural History of New York, for the purpose of visiting the Seminole bands residing in the Everglades and to obtain specimens illustrating their ethnology. With two white companions he set forth from Fort Myers on the west coast, during the first week of August, proceeding by ox-team eastward through the Pine Barrens until the Everglades were reached; here the oxen were left, and, securing canoes, the party pushed on down into the Big Cypress, thence up again into the Everglades proper, and, eventually crossing them, came out on the east coast, at Miami, about the 10th of September.

In the course of our journey we visited a number of Seminole villages, all but one of which, according to the natives, had never before been visited by white men. The natives greatly resent the intrusion of whites, but we were able to gain admission almost everywhere through our guide, Frank Brown of Immokalee, whose father had been an Indian trader for more than thirty years. Father and son bear a most unusual reputation for honesty among both Indians and whites.

In spite of the fact that the villages of the Everglades and Big Cypress Seminole are so little known to outsiders, the Indians themselves are quite familiar with the towns of the white men, for the men, and a few of the women, often go to Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Jupiter, and other towns to trade. Not more than two or three members of all the several bands can speak English well, but all the men make use of a trade jargon composed of Seminole, Spanish, and English, and this nondescript speech has a wide vogue among the white settlers, or "crackers," who dwell in the pinelands.

The number of Indians in all the bands, according to the

best native informant, was not more than 325, despite the exaggerated reports that have been circulated. A few years ago the Indians suffered a loss of about fifteen of their number during an epidemic of measles; up to that time they had been slowly increasing. They are exceedingly conservative, dress habitually in native costume, and live in lodges of approximately the same type as those which they built before their exile from their homes in Georgia and northern Florida. They eke out an existence by raising corn and

various kinds of pumpkins and squashes, and by hunting. They have a ready sale for egrets and alligator skins at the trading posts and they also secure a large number of deerskins and otter pelts. There is practically no fishing except along the rivers, where they shoot fish with the bow and arrow, or spear them; but turtles, which



Photo, by Julian A. Dimock.

FIG. 18.—Charley Cypress and children.

are abundant, are speared in considerable numbers.

The following notes were obtained largely through observation rather than conversation, since none of our party understood the language, except the jargon, and the Indians strongly objected to the taking of written notes. One or two particular friends among

the natives, however, gave some information on such subjects as religion and the disposal of the dead, and presumably another visit would not be fruitless, since the Seminole must be convinced ere now that the writer is neither a Government spy nor a missionary, their two greatest bugbears. The following fragmentary data are presented for what they are worth.

Costume.—The regular everyday dress of the Seminole man consists of a bright, varicolored, calico shirt, narrow at the waist and wrists, with the expanding skirt reaching to the knees. Around the neck are usually worn a number of bandana handkerchiefs. The older men wear a shirt much more like the corresponding garment of civilization, which is not gathered at the waist. The elders also usually wear a turban made of a shawl or a series of bandanas wound together and held in place with a broad band of beaten silver. On special occasions, egrets or other plumes are thrust under the band at the sides.

The ceremonial costume consists of a turban, a shirt of the everyday sort, though silk is used for gala apparel, a calico coat with designs in appliqué, deerskin leggings dyed a rich reddish brown, and moccasins that often have a round flap at the toe, which, except that it is soft, reminds one of the protectors on Apache moccasins.

To this costume is added an array of woven bead or yarn belts. The beaded belts are woven in angular figures, in contradistinction



Photo. by Julian A. Dimock.

FIG. 19.—Widow of one of the old Tigertails.

to the otherwise similar circular designs of the Greeks, and usually symbolizing some life form (see pl. II).

Owing to the subtropical heat and the great moisture of their swampy habitat, the skin clothing is never worn except for some ceremony, although "Littly Billy" (Billy Koniphadjo) gave assurance that in his boyhood the Seminole still wore leggings and moccasins at their daily tasks, discarding them eventually because they were "hot too much." He had no recollection of any upper garment except the calico shirt.

The women wear a full-length skirt girt about the waist, and a

cape with sleeves attached. As the waist or cape does not connect with the skirt, a broad band of copper-colored skin is always visible between the upper and lower garments of the older women. Around their necks they carry enormous necklaces, weighing often from ten to fifteen pounds, and even more. The heavy beads are coiled about their shoulders and throats until

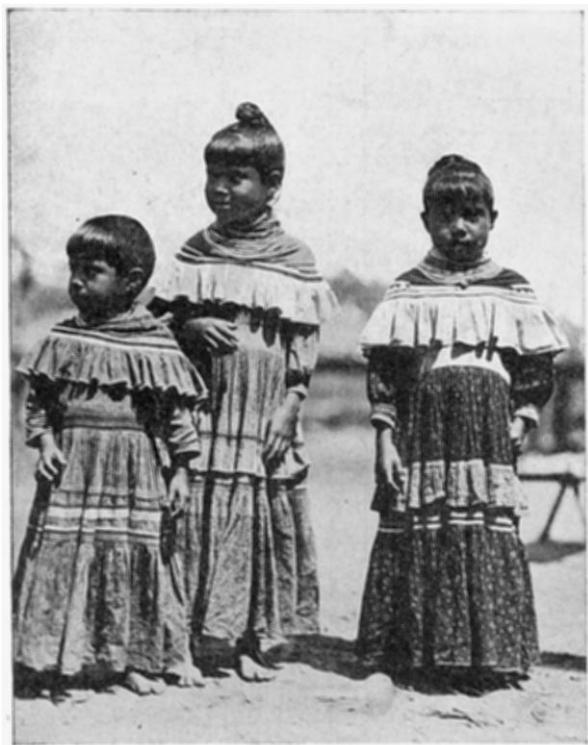


Photo. by Julian A. Dimock.

FIG. 20.—Seminole girls.

their chins are sometimes fairly forced skyward, and causing them to look as if they were being choked (pl. II).



GEORGE OSCEOLA AND WIFE

For ceremonial purposes their garments are the same, except that then they wear capes that are bedecked with hammered silver bangles and brooches, and, in the dance, knee leggings to which tortoise-shell rattles are attached, are worn. The costumes of the children are invariably the same as those of their elders, save that little girls sometimes wear a single-piece gown with an appliqué collar on festival occasions. The accompanying illustrations will suffice to show the details.

Method of Wearing Hair.—The men now cut their hair short after the fashion of the whites, except that they are prone to leave a lock before the ears. It is only a short time since they have ceased to wear a double scalp-lock; indeed a few conservatives still maintain the custom.

The women usually wear their hair coiled on the top of their heads (pl. II), but one widow, still in mourning, allowed hers to hang loose on her shoulders.

Village Life.—Owing to the scarcity of dry land the Seminole are usually compelled to build their villages on "hammocks," or meadow islands, in the swamps, although in some cases their camps are pitched in the pinelands.

The moment guests arrive in camp, if they are allowed to land at all,—for there is usually a long and searching inquiry before white men are admitted,—they are taken to the dining hall. Women or graceful sloe-eyed girls timidly fetch up pots of steaming sofki, turtle meat, or venison, and set them on the platform upon which hosts and guests alike squat on their heels. First the guest and next the oldest man in the camp partake of the viands. If there is a company of guests, the chief among them eats first, then the oldest Indian, and so on, alternately, each one dipping into the common kettle with the common spoon, usually a huge wooden ladle. When meat is served, it is often dished out in tin plates obtained from the traders. Once fed, the pipes are brought forth, and the place of the newcomers as guests in the camp is irrevocably established.

Life in the camps is cool, clean, and pleasant. The breezes sweep through the lodges beneath the thatched roofs, and the camps

are usually as neat as possible. Often in the morning the Indians may be seen raking the village square clean. Little refuse is to be seen about, for while the Seminole throw the bones and scraps from their meals about promiscuously, the wandering dogs and pigs soon make away with them. It is not always pleasant, however,

to have several litters of pigs lying at night beneath the sleeping platform, making indescribable noises. Even the Indians seem never to have become accustomed to it.

Early in the morning one is usually awakened by the thump, thump, thump of the women pounding corn, the squealing of pigs, and the crowing of roosters.

Photo. by Julian A. Dimock.

FIG. 21.—Littly Tiger.

After a hearty breakfast the men take their rifles and depart, some to hunt, some to cultivate their cornfields, and others to spear turtles and fish. Thus the camps are deserted by the older males during most of the daytime.

In our journal there is a description of the first village visited, which is typical of all that were afterward seen. "As we traveled through the cypress . . . we came upon a well-marked trail, about three feet broad, and here dug out for the easier passage of canoes.



After a short journey we saw the yellow glint of the palmetto-thatched lodges of an Indian village. As we drew near, the effect was charming. On a little "hammock," or meadow island, surrounded by dark cypress trees that stood in the glass-clear water, were clustered eight or ten Seminole lodges. The palmetto fans with which they were thatched had faded from green to old gold in color, and above them the sky formed a soft background. Some naked Indian children, who had been playing and bathing in the water near the trail, saw us and splashed screaming into the camp at our approach. One little girl carried on her brown back a baby



FIG. 22.—Seminole house.

brother nearly as large as herself. Several great gaunt dogs came bounding to the water's edge to greet us with their hoarse barking.

"We halted our canoes, and Brown, our guide, pushed ahead in case of trouble, since he was personally acquainted with all the Indians in the neighborhood.¹ We were expected here, however, for this was Little Billy's camp, and the home of Charlie Cypress, a Seminole we had seen at Godden's Landing a few days before.

¹ At some of the camps we were met by armed warriors who were decidedly menacing until Brown, who had their confidence, was able to persuade them that we were neither of their most dreaded enemies—Government spies and missionaries.

"No sooner had we landed than we were invited to come over to the guest house, the largest lodge in the village, and partake of 'sofki,' a sign that we were welcome. Brown explained that it was the invariable custom of the Indians to offer food to strangers whom they approved, and that, once we had tasted it, we would be considered as the guests of the camp.

"This village [like all the others that we saw during our sojourn in the Big Cypress and the Everglades] is situated on a hammock, or meadow island. As the hammocks are never very large, the village is of no great size. The houses are built around the edge of the land, not far from the water, with an open area, in this case roughly rectangular in shape, in the middle. In the center of this space is the cook-house (fig. 23), in which a fire is constantly burning. It is kept up in a curious way. Large cypress logs are cut and laid under the cook-house, radiating from a common center like the spokes of a wheel. At the 'hub' the fire is lighted, and as the wood burns it is constantly shoved inward and hence never needs to be cut into short lengths. At this fire, the only one in the camp, the women cook for the entire village.

"One of the houses of the village (usually the largest one) is reserved for eating, and here food, generally sofki, venison, biscuits or corn-bread, and coffee, is always ready for the hungry. Twice a day, in the morning and evening, the Seminole have regular meals, but eating between times is a constant practice.

"At meal-time the men and boys enter this common lodge. Under the pent roof of thatch are arranged several platforms, raised a few feet from the floor by means of stakes driven in the ground, and entirely independent of the supporting beams of the house. The largest of these scaffolds is the dining table, and on it squat the Indians about the sofki bowl. A huge wooden ladle projects from the steaming brew, and one by one, beginning with the chief or oldest man of the camp, they dip out a ladleful. An ordinary Seminole spoon contains enough to satisfy a white man, and it usually forces the Indian to sip several times before he replaces the ladle and lets the next man have his inning. . . . After the men and boys have eaten, the women and girls take their share.

"Every eating-house is also used as a guest house. Strangers or visitors arriving at a camp go directly to this lodge, and food is brought them at once by the women. When they have eaten, or while they are doing so, the men come over and question them, if they are strangers, as to their purpose in coming to the camp. If they appear to be friendly, they are allowed to remain in the eating-house as long as they stay in camp."

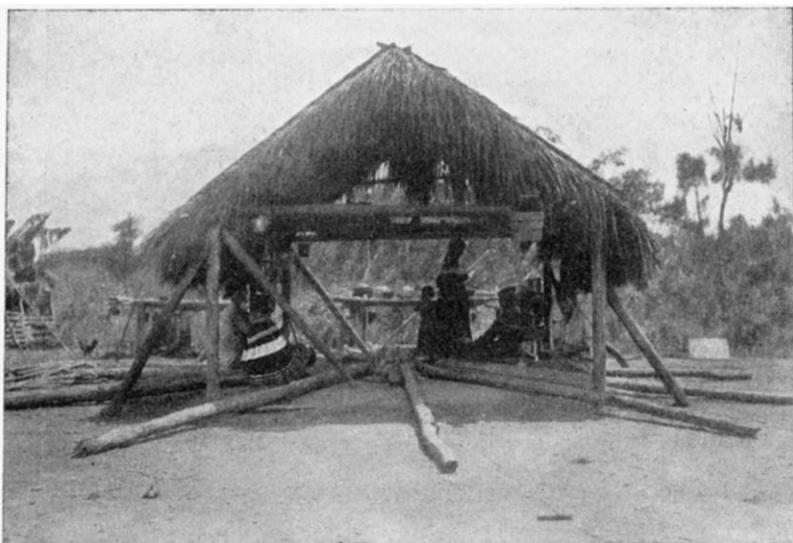


FIG. 23.—Seminole cook-house.

Beadwork.—Beads are woven into belts, fobs, and garters. None sewn on skin or cloth were seen. The belts are of two kinds—those worn around the waist, which are furnished with a set of long, trailing tassels at the ends and middle, and those worn over the shoulders, which have tassels only at the ends. They are woven either entirely of beads on a thread foundation, or largely of yarn with a few beads mixed in. The designs are often symbolic, but the only meanings that could be obtained were: (1) diamond-back rattlesnake, (2) "ground" rattlesnake, (3) everglade terrapin, (4) terrapin spear-point. The beads are woven on small plain heddles, made of split palmetto ribs. The beaded garters are

similar to those of the more northerly tribes and are worn bound around the outside of the leggings below the knee. A photograph of one pair was seen in possession of Charlie Tigertail, but no others were heard of.

Tanning.—In preparing deerskin leather, the hide is first dried in the sun until it is stiff and hard; it is then thoroughly soaked in water and wrung out by passing it about a tree, tying the ends

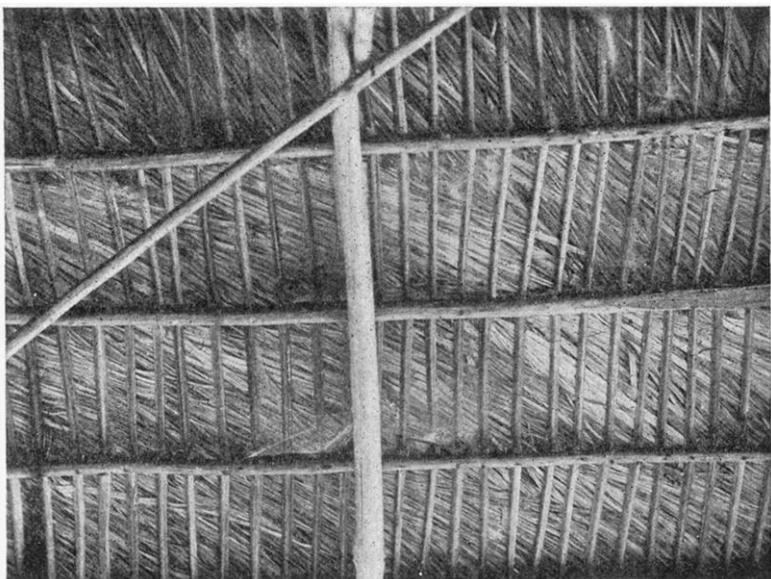


Photo. by Julian A. Dimock.

FIG. 24.—Palmetto thatch, from within.

together, and running a stick through the knot to afford better leverage while wringing. While the skin is still damp it is thrown over the smooth upper end of an inclined log set in the ground, and the hair is scraped off with a beaming tool. While the skin is drying, it is rendered pliable by rubbing it over the edge of a spatula-like stick set up in the ground. Next deer brains are mixed with water until the liquid is thick and soapy, and the skin is then soaked therein. Great pains are taken to saturate the hide thoroughly; it is then wrung, soaked again and again, and dried. Sometimes this ends the process, when the skin is dyed a deep reddish

brown by the use of oak-bark and is used without further preparation. Usually, however, the leather is finished by smoking. The skin is sewed up in bag-like form and suspended, bottom up, from an inclined stick. The edges are pegged down about a small hole in which a smoldering fire burns. The smoke and fumes are allowed to impregnate the hide thoroughly, and then the tanning is completed.

The Seminole prepare brains for preservation by smearing them over long wisps of Spanish moss, and allowing them to dry. These brain-cakes, which are molded in circular form, with a hole in the center, are suspended in quantities from every cook-house, and have the quaint appearance of festoons of doughnuts. Deer and pig brains are most commonly used for tanning, but, bear brains are considered the most valuable.

Religion.—The Seminole believe that the souls of the worthy dead go to an abode where existence is ideal, where social dances, feasts, and ball games are held uninterruptedly; but those whose earthly existence has not been above reproach are doomed to destruction. The souls must pass over a long trail from the world to the sky country. This journey requires four days, and a number of tests, consisting of tempting food placed at intervals beside the path, are encountered. If the ghost partakes of any of this food, some unknown misfortune will overwhelm it. At length the wanderer arrives at a river, over which a slippery log gives access to the village of the blessed. The bridge is guarded by a dog, and if the wayfarer has led an evil life, the animal shakes the log and hurls the unfortunate being into the stream, where it is devoured by an alligator or a great fish. The writer has collected data similar in almost every detail from the Menomini of northern Wisconsin and the Seneca of New York.

The Seminole carefully secrete their cemeteries in places remote from intruders. So far as could be learned there are no cemeteries of considerable size, only a few isolated graves on scattered hammocks. Perhaps two or three graves may be grouped together occasionally, but this is not the rule.

In disposing of the dead, the corpse is laid on the ground with its head toward the west. It is covered with a rude pile of cypress

logs crossed over it. Food, and kettles, weapons, and other objects are placed beside the body, and the whole is roofed over with palmetto thatch. A fire is kept beside the cairn for four nights

after the burial, in order to provide light and warmth for the spirit of the deceased on its sky journey. If a death occurs in a village, the camp is deserted, and clusters of abandoned shacks may sometimes be found, lonely witnesses to this costly custom. Often the Indians return after six months or a year and burn the village. The white "crackers" say that when the Indians residing in a permanent village believe a man is dying, they carry him outside the village to die in a lodge hastily erected for the purpose, and thus avoid the necessity of moving camp to escape misfortune. Because

FIG. 25.—Dugout canoe, showing peculiar bow so made to pass through the sawgrass.

the dead are buried with their heads to the west, the Seminole always sleep heading in the opposite direction, for fear of ill luck. The writer was repeatedly warned by Indian friends to turn around, when lying with his head to the west.

Silversmiths and their Work.—In common with all the Eastern tribes, the Seminole are very fond of silver ornaments, most of which they make for themselves. This jewelry is neither as elaborate nor as handsome as that made by more northerly tribes, nor does it have much variety in form. Head or turban bands, spangles, crescents, earrings, and finger-rings are the forms observed and collected. The process of manufacture and the tools employed are simple. To make a spangle, a coin is heated in a small fire;



it is then removed with a pair of pincers and hammered out with an ordinary commercial hammer. The poll of an axe driven into a log serves the purpose of an anvil. The process of alternate heating and pounding are repeated again and again until the coin has been flattened out considerably and the design effaced. One smith observed at work greased the coin from time to time as he heated it. After it has been heated and hammered to the satisfaction of the smith, the spangle is pared down with a butcher-knife or a razor-blade until it has been reduced to the desired degree of thinness.

In this state the blank form is sometimes decorated with a design incised with a file or a knife-blade. Any irregularities are filed off and the trinket is polished on a whetstone. Sometimes the designs are cut out with a cold-chisel and finished with a knife. Holes for sewing the bangle to a garment are made by driving a nail through the metal and smoothing the edges with a knife.

This process of silverworking was observed on two occasions, and there was but little difference in the tools or in the manipulation of the smiths. Antler prongs are used as punches to make raised lines and bosses, and the only other tool which was seen or collected,



Photo, by Julian A. Dimock.

FIG. 26.—Pounding corn with pestle and mortar.

besides those described, was a crude blow-pipe used in the manufacture of the plain finger-rings which are much worn by the Indians.

Houses.—The typical Seminole lodge is a pent roof of palmetto thatch raised over several platforms on which the occupants sit or recline. There are no sides, since the Everglades and the Big Cypress are so far below the frost-line that the atmosphere is rarely cold, and the protection from the rain afforded by the closely thatched roofs with their wide projecting eaves is all that is necessary.

The lodges average fifteen feet by twelve, but they vary greatly in size. They are made of cypress logs nailed or lashed together. A few houses have a raised floor throughout, giving the appearance of a pile-dwelling.

Food.—Those bands of Seminole residing on or near the edge of the upland and in the Big Cypress depend very largely on game, principally deer and wild turkey, for meat. The Everglades bands, on the other hand, utilize turtles almost entirely. Corn, squashes, sugar-cane, and a few bananas are raised. Usually the home hammock is not big enough to accommodate both village and cornfield, hence the crops must be produced on some other island, often a day's journey or more distant. The method of cultivation followed is primitive. The trees are killed by

Photo, by Julian A. Dimock.

FIG. 27.—Wooden ball-sticks in use.

girdling, so that the sun shines through when the leaves have fallen. Then the ground is broken with a hoe and the crops planted. These are casually tended from time to time thereafter.

Most meats are boiled, but turtles are not infrequently roasted before the fire. The Indians seldom take the trouble to kill the unfortunate reptiles before commencing to prepare them



for food—they merely cut off the plastron and butcher the animal alive and kicking, when it is set up before the fire and roasted in its own oven. Corn is eaten green, or boiled or roasted on the cob, or else dried and pounded into meal with mortar and pestle. The meal is first sifted through an open-mesh basket and then winnowed by being tossed into the air, the breeze carrying away the chaff, while the heavier, edible portion of the corn falls back into the flat receiving basket. In this condition the meal is mixed with water and boiled to make sofki. This is the name applied primarily to this corn soup, of which, in addition to the kind mentioned, there is fermented or sour sofki, and soup made from parched corn, which is by far the most savory of the three. In parching corn, the kernels are placed in a kettle, the bottom of which is covered thickly with sand. The grains are stirred in the sand to keep them from burning. When sufficiently parched, the corn is crushed in a mortar, and, with the occasional addition of sugar, makes a delicious food. A little of the meal is sometimes added to water for use as a cooling drink.

Social Organization.—Very little was learned about the present social organization of the Seminole, except that there are still a number of exogamous clans with female descent. After marriage the man always goes to live in his wife's house. There are no longer any regular chiefs; the oldest man in each camp usually has the most authority. It is said that all births take place in shelters erected for the purpose, away from the village. The Seminole preserve the taboo against telling their names to strangers, and this, it is said, accounts for the fact that so many of these Indians are known by nicknames given them by traders. Negro slaves are still held by some of the Indians.

A considerable body of information might still be gathered from this primitive band, especially in regard to their material culture, but it is probable that for the details of their religion, tribal and social organization, mythology, government, and indeed all the subjective phases of their life, the more civilized Seminole now residing in Oklahoma would prove more easy of approach.